

Washington Plans an Aggressive War

By Ralph Stavins, Richard J. Barnet and Marcus G. Raskin.
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In the court of public opinion, the verdict is already in. The war in Vietnam has been judged a mistake of such magnitude as to constitute a political "crime." And the guilty are being punished: Save for the few who recanted in time, the high officials who planned and conducted the war are probably barred from office-holding, the academics are exiled to havens in the South and Southwest, and all are destined—so long as the public mood holds—to suffer obloquy and opprobrium.

That verdict, however, seems inadequate to the authors of "Washington Plans an Aggressive War," partly because it is too lenient but even more because it treats Vietnam as an isolated case. The common theme of Ralph Stavins's history of American involvement, Richard Barnet's analysis of the national security bureaucracy and Marcus Raskin's treatment of the rise of executive irresponsibility is that the conditions and character of American foreign policy need remaking. They argue that this transformation of "imperial war-making" into a "code of personal responsibility" requires formal statutes and legal sanctions. Those who were responsible for Vietnam must be tried for the crime of waging aggressive war and formally excluded from office for a decade; a statute must be enacted forbidding officials to "preach or advocate" militarism or genocide or to conduct these and similar policies. "Washington Plans an Aggressive War" is not so much a study of the war as a brief for the prosecution.

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According to the authors, Ralph Stavins and others from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington conducted more than 300 interviews over 20 months with "many of the top Presidential advisers to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, generals and admirals, middle-level bureaucrats who occupied strategic positions in the national security bureaucracy, and officials, military and civilian, who carried out policy in the field in Vietnam." They had access to a good deal of documentation as well as portions of the official documentary record now known as "the Pentagon Papers." A second volume, "Washington Wages an Aggressive War," is to be published next spring.

Like many prosecutors, the authors are over-zealous. Unlike Neil Sheehan and his co-workers on The New York Times story, they are not content to let the protagonists speak for themselves, finding it necessary to include extensive glosses and explanations which go beyond the limits of permissible interpretation. For example, Gen. Maxwell Taylor's plan to infiltrate combat troops under the cover of flood relief—however reprehensible—is hardly illuminated by the comment that Taylor had "boldly conceived a strategy that could well lead to genocide but he was rather timid in applying it." A more valid reading would be that Taylor designed a scheme which could lead to escalation but sought to minimize the risks, but then there would be no clear connection to a war crime.

Similarly, Stavins does a fine job of exposing what remains of the Kennedy myth, exposing J.F.K.'s secretiveness, unwillingness to take responsibility and desire to escape the limits of normal political institutions. (In general, Kennedy seems to have created a "credibility gap" greater than anything that came

after; in these years, however, we were more credulous.) But Stavins mars his analysis by referring to Kennedy's régime as a "budding totalitarian state under the control of a leader," a statement which a friend might call impassioned nonsense and an enemy malicious libel. Such liberties with the evidence, and they are numerous, are bound to create the suspicion that the prosecutors suspect their own case.

So they should. There is, in all of the book, no serious attempt to define "aggression." Small wonder: the task has baffled international lawyers ever since it was first attempted. In domestic law, if I believe you are about to assault me, I can ask for an injunction or simply wait, trusting that the likelihood of punishment will deter you from any assault you may be planning. You may strike or kill me anyway, but the odds are tolerable. In international politics, given the failure of collective security in the United Nations, the case is not the same and for obvious reasons. Failure to take preventive action can have consequences as serious as combating an unreal but imagined risk.

We believe, for example, that Chamberlain's appeasement was as wrong as we now think the domino theory was in Vietnam. But it was appeasement that gave us the "clear cases" of aggression in World War II we now seem to expect everywhere. If Chamberlain had fought Hitler over the Rhineland or the Sudeten question, we would have no "proof" that the logic of the Nazi regime led to aggressive war; it would be easy to see such a hypothetical conflict as an "imperialist struggle" against "German self-determination." Yet such a policy, as we now think, would have saved millions of lives. Chamberlain held an erroneous theory; our policy-makers adhered to an opposite notion, one we are convinced was equally wrong, but a theory nonetheless. Are officials legally criminal if their ideas prove inaccurate?

It is clear, after all, that Washington did not think it was planning an aggressive war. It believed it was acting to forestall "Communist ex-